

From Eschatology to Empire: *Fatra* as a Driving Force in Rewriting the Early Isma‘ili Movement

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Abstract

The concept of *fatra*, which has its basis in the Quran as the interim time between prophets, was marshalled and reimagined by the early Isma‘ili movement as a way to explain the absence of the awaited *mahdī*, Muḥammad b. Ismā‘il. In this understanding, the imam may go into hiding during times of heightened persecution or perhaps even die before the next imam has been designated. However, the establishment of the Fatimid state complicated the idea that there could be a time when the imam is absent. The *K. al-Fatarāt wa-l-qirānāt*, attributed to the tenth-century Fatimid author Ja‘far b. Maṣṣūr al-Yaman, captures the Fatimid reckoning with the implications of *fatarāt*. It rewrites the history of the early movement to claim that since the advent of the cycle of the Prophet Muhammad there has not been a *fatra*, nor will there be one again so long as the Fatimids reign.

Keywords

Fatimids – Isma‘ilism – Ja‘far b. Maṣṣūr al-Yaman – *fatra*

Introduction

In 261/865 in Salamiyya, Syria, the founder of the Isma‘iliyya, ‘Abdallāh the Elder, established the headquarters of what would become a worldwide

missionary movement.¹ He claimed to be the deputy of Muḥammad b. Ismāʿīl, a seventh-generation descendant of the Prophet Muhammad who was, according to ʿAbdallāh, the imam and awaited *mahdī* but had gone into hiding out of fear of persecution. ʿAbdallāh characterized this period of the imam's precautionary exile as a *fatra*, or a time in which God's prophets or imams are temporarily inaccessible because of death or exile. Although the concept of *fatra* has its origins in the Quran as the interval of time between prophets, the early Ismaʿili movement reimaged it as denoting the necessary concealment of the imam in times of political strife.²

ʿAbdallāh the Elder's followers rallied around the imminent reappearance of Muḥammad b. Ismāʿīl and the eschatological events it would initiate. This moment, they believed, would bring about the defeat of the false Abbasid caliphs in Baghdad, end injustice worldwide, and usher in a new era in which the ultimate truth of religion would be unveiled, rendering religious praxis unnecessary. It was in the name of Muḥammad b. Ismāʿīl and this final era before the end of the world that ʿAbdallāh sent followers to establish missionary bases in parts of the Islamic world far from the reach of the Abbasid caliph whom they sought to overthrow. The Ismaʿili mission (*daʿwa*) found an eager audience in Yemen, Bahrain, Rayy, and the rural plains surrounding Kufa, as well as among the Berber tribes of North Africa. ʿAbdallāh and his network of missionaries (*dāʿīs*) furnished these revolutionary cells with money and weapons; they awaited only the return of Muḥammad b. Ismāʿīl to launch an attack on the Abbasid usurpers.³

In time, ʿAbdallāh the Elder handed down his position as *ḥujja*, or deputy to the *mahdī*, to his sons and grandsons. By 286/899, the leadership of the *daʿwa* was in the hands of ʿAbdallāh's grandson Abū l-Shalaghlagh. At this time, Abū l-Shalaghlagh announced by formal letter to his followers around the Islamic world that he had named his nephew his successor. However, his followers found the announcement strangely worded, and some took it to mean not that Abū l-Shalaghlagh's nephew would succeed him as deputy to the *mahdī*

1 Idrīs, *ʿUyūn al-akhbār*, vol. 4, p. 366. The following narrative represents one version of early Ismaʿili history that helps us make sense of the shifting understandings of *fatra* in early and Fatimid Ismaʿili thought; however, it is not the only version. This article does not aim to litigate the details of early Ismaʿili history; rather, it seeks to situate the concept of *fatra* within it. For a longer discussion of the various ways of understanding the development of the early Ismaʿili movement and the problem of sources, see Ivanow, *Ismāʿili Traditions*; Daftary, *Ismailis*; Madelung, "The Imamate in Early Ismaili Doctrine".

2 Jaʿfar b. Manṣūr, *Master and Disciple*, pp. 164–166.

3 Halm, *Empire of the Mahdī*, pp. 47–57.

but that the nephew *was* the awaited *mahdī* himself.⁴ An emissary was sent to Salamiyya to get to the bottom of the matter. When the emissary arrived in Salamiyya, he met with the nephew, Abū l-Shalaghlagh having passed on before the emissary's arrival. The nephew confirmed not only that he was indeed the *mahdī* and thus that the mission in the name of Muḥammad b. Ismā'īl was over, but also that from the nephew's perspective, "Muḥammad b. Ismā'īl" had only ever been a code name for himself, meant to guard his true identity from the Isma'ilis' Abbasid enemies. The emissary returned with this shocking revelation. When the broader Isma'ili community learned of the claim that Muḥammad b. Ismā'īl was a cover story, many distanced themselves from the man in Salamiyya claiming to be the *mahdī*, instead continuing to await the reappearance of Muḥammad b. Ismā'īl. An irreversible rupture in the Isma'ili community was thus created.⁵

The revelation left many unanswered questions for those who remained loyal to the man calling himself the *mahdī*: Was this nephew, now known by his regnal name 'Abdallāh al-Mahdī, even a descendant of the Prophet Muhammad? Did his appearance mean that the final antinomian era of history had now begun? And if he was in fact the *mahdī* whose appearance heralded the coming of the resurrection and the Day of Judgement, why did he have a son and heir? 'Abdallāh al-Mahdī left these questions unanswered for a time, and those who remained loyal to him had to reckon with the implications of these doctrinal shifts on their own. However, the formal establishment of an Isma'ili state in 269/909 did a lot of talking for him. For if there was a state, that state needed a law, not merely ultimate religious truth without praxis; and certainly the establishment of a state and the naming of an heir created a sense of stability and continuity incongruous with the imminent eschatological expectations that had characterized the early Isma'ili mission.

One way in which 'Abdallāh al-Mahdī's followers and enemies alike began to make sense of this shift was by resuscitating the old concept of *fatra*. His adversaries—the dissident Isma'ilis who continued to await Muḥammad b. Ismā'īl—claimed that they were still in an era of *fatra*, now understood as a time of political turmoil in which leadership of the Isma'ili community had been usurped by heretics. Meanwhile, the Fatimid missionaries began to write

4 The identity and role of Abū l-Shalaghlagh in the formation and subsequent schism of the early Isma'ili movement are more complex than can be covered within the scope of this article. For further discussion of this enigmatic character, see Madelung, "Imamate", pp. 75, 95–6; Ivanow, *Rise of the Fātimids*, pp. 42–43, 59–60; al-Hamdani, "Genealogy of Fatimid Caliphs", pp. 10–11, 19; Hamdani and de Blois, "Re-examination of al-Mahdī's Letter", pp. 179–182; al-Nīsābūrī, *Istīṭār al-imām*, pp. 95–96, trans. Ivanow, *Rise of the Fātimids*, pp. 162–163.

5 Halm, *Empire of the Mahdi*, pp. 58–60.

a new version of history, in which the early days of the Ismaʿili mission in anticipation of the reappearance of Muḥammad b. Ismāʿīl had not, in fact, constituted a *fatra*. The Fatimid rulers, they argued, had always been the rightful imams, guiding their followers and communicating with the believers, never absent for even the blink of an eye. In fact, since the birth of the Prophet, there had never been a time without a rightfully guided imam, and until the end of days—now pushed far into the unforeseeable future—there would not be a *fatra* again. Like the rainbow as a symbol of God's covenant with humankind to never again flood the earth, the Fatimid imam was a sign that God's regent would never again be separated from his community.

Examining a treatise on *fatarāt* from the fourth/tenth-century *K. al-Fatarāt wa-l-qirānāt* attributed to Jaʿfar b. Maṣṣūr al-Yaman (d. c.349/960),⁶ I argue that this shift in the Fatimid Ismaʿili understanding of *fatra*—from a sign of the continuing absence of the imam to a historical problem that had plagued the prophetic cycles prior to Muhammad's and would never occur again—represents a creative response to the problem posed by the framing of the community's early history as a *fatra*. Specifically, the idea that there could be a time without an imam and that one had occurred in recent memory was a threat to the stability of the succession in a growing political empire. It was more expedient to claim, as the *K. al-Fatarāt wa-l-qirānāt* did, that the uniquely exalted Fatimid rule would continue without interruption in perpetuity. Given that *fatra* seems to be a common trope in Ismaʿili literature, as I show below, creating a version of history in which times of *fatra* have not, in fact, taken place since the advent of Muhammad offered a potent solution. To build my argument, I will begin by sketching the basic outlines of the Ismaʿilis' cyclical view of world history, in which the concept of *fatra* plays a crucial yet underappreciated role. I will then examine two relevant discussions of *fatarāt*—one pre-Fatimid and the other written in response to the Fatimid rise

6 On *K. al-Fatarāt wa-l-qirānāt*, see Ivanow, *Guide to Ismaili Literature*, p. 18; al-Majdūʿ, *Fahrassa*, pp. 265–269; Goriawala, *Descriptive Catalogue*, pp. 13–14 nos. 18–19; Poonawala, *Biobibliography of Ismāʿīlī Literature*, pp. 73–74 no. 11; GAS I, 578; GAL SI, 324. This text has also been uncritically edited by Ḥusām Khaḍḍūr; see Jaʿfar b. Maṣṣūr, *al-Fatarāt*. Because Khaḍḍūr's edition differs substantially from the manuscripts on which I base this study with respect to the ordering and organization of the discussion on *fatarāt*, all references to *K. al-Fatarāt wa-l-qirānāt* here refer to MS Library of the Institute of Ismaili Studies 726. On the biography of Jaʿfar b. Maṣṣūr al-Yaman, see al-Yamānī, *Kashf asrār al-bāṭiniyya*, pp. 39–42; al-Jawdhārī, *Sīrat al-Ustādh Jawdhar*, ed. and trans. Hamid Haji as *Inside the Immaculate Portal*, p. 140; Stern, “Jaʿfar b. Mansur al-Yaman's Poems on the rebellion of Abu Yazid,” in his *Studies in Early Ismailism*, pp. 146–162; Halm, “Djaʿfar b. Maṣṣūr al-Yaman”; Jaʿfar b. Maṣṣūr, *Master and Disciple*, pp. 22–27. On dating and authenticating Jaʿfar's corpus, see Hollenberg, “Interpretation”, pp. 56–66; Gillon, *Book of Unveiling*, pp. 43–60.

to power—before diving into the discussion in *K. al-Fatarāt wa-l-qirānāt* and exploring how the author's pro-Fatimid perspective leads him to reexamine and reinvent the Fatimid relationship with the concept of *fatra*.

Ismaʿīli Cyclical History: A Brief Introduction⁷

Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, and Jesus are acknowledged in the Quran as prophets sent by God before Muhammad. They are usually referred to as *rasūl*, messenger, or *nabī*, prophet, and their role is primarily that of divine emissary: each prophet brings a message from God to his community that is specific to the community's time and context. Moses, for example, brings the message of God to his people in the form of the Torah, while Jesus is noted for his use of parables. Muhammad's message, the Quran, is likewise specific to the Arabic-speaking population of the Arabian Peninsula: it refers to itself as "an Arabic Quran" (*Qurʾān ʿarabī*)⁸ and speaks to specific cultural practices, such the supplication of local deities.⁹

The Quran also acknowledges a host of other biblical characters including David, Solomon, Isaac, Ishmael, Mary, Joseph, and Jacob—roughly twenty-five in all. Some are accorded the title of prophet or messenger (or both), but the exact distinction between these two titles is unclear and has been much debated within the tradition of quranic interpretation. It is possible to argue that all messengers are prophets but not all prophets are messengers—that messengers are sent specifically as spiritual leaders of a community, whereas prophets are sent only to warn a community. However, the Quran itself is ambiguous on the issue.¹⁰

Taking the many stories of prophets and paraprophetic figures in the Quran as its starting point, Ismaʿīli doctrine codifies these figures into a complex hierarchy and applies distinct terms for the various ranks within this hierarchy. For Ismaʿīlis, the entirety of human history can be divided into seven successive cycles (*adwār*, sing. *dawr*) of varying lengths, each led by an individual prophet who is called neither a *nabī* nor a *rasūl* but rather a *nāṭiq* (pl. *nuṭaqāʾ*). These *nuṭaqāʾ* are Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, Muhammad, and finally the

7 For a more in-depth discussion of the nuances of Ismaʿīli cyclical history, see Halm, *Kosmologie und Heilslehre*, pp. 18–37; Madelung, "Imamate".

8 Quran 12:2, 20:112, 39:28, etc.

9 Quran 53:19–23.

10 See Wensinck, "Rasūl".

Mahdī or Qā'im.¹¹ This figure, whose initial identification as Muḥammad b. Ismā'īl was revised by the Fatimids, is the messiah whose era inaugurates the end of days.¹² Each of the *nuṭaqā'* brings a law that abrogates what was brought by the *nāṭiq* of the prior cycle.¹³ Regarding the cycle of Noah, for example, the *K. al-Fatarāt wa-l-qirānāt* states that "[Noah] abrogated the outer manifestation of the command (*amr*) that Adam had brought. ... Then he established his law, clarified its statutes, and propagated its doctrines."¹⁴ Likewise, Abraham is described as abrogating the law of Noah.¹⁵

Although *nuṭaqā'* have unfettered and unparalleled access to the divine, they are nonetheless mortal human beings whose deaths leave their communities without religious guidance. Consequently, each *nāṭiq* is succeeded by an *asās* (founder) or a *waṣī* (legatee),¹⁶ who is responsible for interpreting the *nāṭiq*'s revelation and keeping the community of believers united after the *nāṭiq*'s death.¹⁷ After the death of the *asās/waṣī*, the leadership of the community of believers falls to a series of six or seven imams, often descendants of the *nāṭiq* and/or the *asās/waṣī*.

When the imams, in turn, reach the end of their lifespans, the leadership of the community is taken up by lower ranks of the hierarchy, often not considered to belong to the prophetic line: *lawāḥiq* (adjuncts), *ajniḥa* (wings),

11 His era will unveil the ultimate truths obscured by the relative truth of each of the former cycles. In the *K. al-Fatarāt wa-l-qirānāt*, the Mahdī is also referred to as *ṣāhib al-qiyāma*, or the Lord of the Resurrection, indicating that his era will end the present era of concealment and bring about a new era of manifestation.

12 Halm, "Dawr" and *Kosmologie und Heilslehre*, pp. 24–36; Ibn Ḥawshab, *al-Rushd wa-l-hidāya*, pp. 197–204; Ja'far b. Maṣṣūr, *al-Kashf*, pp. 14, 132–133; al-Sijistānī, *Ithbāt al-nubuwwāt*, pp. 200–201, 257.

13 Whether Adam brought a law is a matter of disagreement, debated particularly within the so-called Persian school and later taken up again by al-Kirmānī. Al-Nasafī and al-Sijistānī do not include Adam among the law-bringing prophets, whereas al-Rāzī and al-Kirmānī do. See al-Rāzī, *al-Iṣlāḥ*, pp. 57–131; al-Sijistānī, *Maqālīd*, pp. 245–251; al-Kirmānī, *al-Ri'yād*, pp. 176–212; De Smet, "Adam, premier prophète et législateur?"; idem, "Loi rationnelle et loi imposée".

14 *K. al-Fatarāt*, fol. 26.

15 Ja'far b. Maṣṣūr, *al-Kashf*, pp. 112–113, trans. Gillon, *Book of Unveiling*, pp. 342–343.

16 The terms *asās* and *waṣī* are used interchangeably in *K. al-Fatarāt*, where there seems to be no difference in their function. This usage contrasts with that of the Persian school of al-Nasafī, al-Rāzī, and al-Sijistānī. Madelung has posited that al-Nasafī was the first to substitute *asās* for *waṣī*; however, it was not until *K. al-Fatarāt* and the (contentiously dated and ascribed) *R. al-Mudhhiba* that *asās* came to replace *waṣī* in Fatimid texts. See Madelung, "Imamate", p. 119–20; Halm, "Asās".

17 On the role of the *asās/waṣī*, see Ja'far b. Maṣṣūr, *al-Kashf*, pp. 67–68, 125; idem, *Ta'wīl al-ḥurūf*, fols. 1v–2r; al-Sijistānī, *Ithbāt al-nubuwwāt*, pp. 138–140; Halm, *Kosmologie und Heilslehre*, pp. 22–24.

hujaj (proofs), *nuqabā'* (heads), and *mustawda'in* (trustees).¹⁸ The titles *hujja*, *lāhiq*, and *janāh* seem to be used idiosyncratically for the same position, that of the head missionary in each of the twelve regions of the world;¹⁹ however, the author of *K. al-Fatarāt wa-l-qirānāt* occasionally juxtaposes two titles, such as *naqīb* and *hujja*, indicating that he saw them as discrete ranks. It is possible that as Isma'ili doctrine became more developed, regional differences in terminology morphed into distinct ranks of the hierarchy.²⁰

Each *nātiq* also has to contend with an adversary (*didd*) throughout his prophethood.²¹ As each cycle progresses and leadership trickles down to the lower ranks, this adversary gains power, and the situation of the community of believers becomes increasingly dire.²² It is at the nadir of this cycle that a new *nātiq* appears, bringing a new revelation and initiating a new prophetic cycle. The period of deterioration leading up to this nadir is often described as a *fatra* (interim), an interruption in the prophetic cycle during which leadership of the community falls to the lower ranks because of the death of the imam or his concealment and quiescence during a time of political turmoil.²³ The concept of *fatra* comes from the Quran, in which intervals between prophets, such as the period between the appearance of Jesus and the appearance of Muhammad, are described as *fatarāt*. Quran 5:19 states, "O People of the Book! Our Messenger has come unto you, making things clear to you, after an interval [*fatra*] in [the series] of messengers, lest you should say, 'There came to us no bearer of glad tidings, nor any warner.'"²⁴ Although *fatarāt* are often described as occurring at the end of a prophetic cycle, they can in fact occur at any time.²⁵

Drawing on the quranic understanding more broadly, in the Isma'ili understanding, each prophetic cycle contains a set number of characters and tropes and a predictable series of events. Consequently, stories about past prophets

18 On these ranks and their responsibilities, see al-Rāzī, *al-Iṣlāḥ*, pp. 312–313, 323, 326–327; Ja'far b. Manṣūr, *Ta'wīl al-ḥurūf*, fols. 2v–3r, 4r–6r; al-Sijistānī, *Ithbāt al-nubuwwāt*, pp. 138–141.

19 Daftary, *Ismailis*, p. 229; Madelung, "Imamate", p. 81.

20 On the evolution of the ranks of the *da'wa*, see Hamdani, "Evolution of the Organisational Structure".

21 Ja'far b. Manṣūr, *al-Kashf*, pp. 11–12, trans. Gillon, *Book of Unveiling*, pp. 87–88; Ja'far b. Manṣūr, *Sarā'ir wa-asrār al-nuṭaqā'*, p. 87, where it is also said that the adversary is always from the family of the *nātiq*.

22 Ja'far b. Manṣūr, *Sarā'ir wa-asrār al-nuṭaqā'*, pp. 150–152; al-Rāzī, *al-Iṣlāḥ*, pp. 312–313, 323.

23 Ja'far b. Manṣūr, *Master and Disciple*, p. 165; idem, *Sarā'ir wa-asrār al-nuṭaqā'*, p. 66; al-Rāzī, *al-Iṣlāḥ*, pp. 323, 326.

24 The translation is from Nasr et al., *Study Quran*.

25 Al-Rāzī, *al-Iṣlāḥ*, p. 327.

are helpful in contextualizing the present and instrumental in predicting the future. No single set of characters in any of the prophetic cycles is agreed upon by all sources; rather, the texts vary both in terms of who occupies what role and in terms of which roles in the prophetic hierarchy are accounted for.

Fatarāt in Ismaʿīli Literature

The *K. al-Fatarāt wa-l-qirānāt* is noteworthy among Ismaʿīli texts of its time for its focus on the *fatarāt* that interrupt the cyclical progress of history. In many other contemporaneous texts, such as Abū Ḥātim al-Rāzī's *K. al-Iṣlāḥ*, as well as in other texts attributed to Jaʿfar b. Maṣṣūr al-Yaman, such as *K. al-Kashf* and *Sarāʾir wa-asrār al-nuṭaqāʾ*, the concept of an interruption in the prophetic cycle is presented as something that the reader would already be familiar with; the term *fatra* is used without definition or explanation of its causes and consequences.²⁶ For example, in *Sarāʾir wa-asrār al-nuṭaqāʾ*, Jaʿfar says of the time of Peleg, an imam in the era of Noah, "Peleg's time was a time of *fatra*, and so the affair (*amr*, i.e. the imamate) persisted in concealment until the appearance of Ṣāliḥ."²⁷ Al-Sijistānī states with similar laconism in his *Sullam al-najāt*, "The appearance of David took place at a time of *fatra*, when the enemies of that era were conceited because they had suppressed the *daʿwa* of Moses."²⁸

In none of these contexts do the authors define the term *fatra* or provide an in-depth explanation of what a period of *fatra* entails. Such passing references to *fatra* in contemporaneous Ismaʿīli literature seem to indicate that the concept was a perennial part of the Ismaʿīli understanding of cyclical history. It is perhaps because of the matter-of-fact nature of these brief references to *fatra* that scholarship on Ismaʿīli thought and history has not yet produced a robust theorization of this crucial component of Ismaʿīli doctrine; instead, the limited discussions that exist mirror the available primary sources.²⁹ I aim to bring both breadth and depth to our understanding of *fatra* by situating its

26 Jaʿfar b. Maṣṣūr, *al-Kashf*, p. 73; trans. Gillon, *Book of Unveiling*, p. 231.

27 Jaʿfar b. Maṣṣūr, *Sarāʾir wa-asrār al-nuṭaqāʾ*, p. 66.

28 Al-Sijistānī, *Sullam al-najāt*, pp. 72–73.

29 By far the most robust discussion is Shin Nomoto's in his dissertation ("Early Ismāʿīli Thought"), where he discusses *fatarāt* in the context of al-Rāzī's thought. Additionally, David Hollenberg theorizes in *Beyond the Qurʾān*, on the basis of an idea of Wilferd Madelung's, that *fatarāt* were introduced into Ismaʿīli thought by Abū Ḥātim al-Rāzī; I problematize this below in my discussion of the earlier *K. al-Ālim wa-l-ghulām*. Halm offers a passing discussion in both *Kosmologie und Heilslehre* and his article "Zur Datierung".

comparatively robust discussion in *K. al-Fatarāt wa-l-qirānāt* in its context alongside discussions in prior Ismaʿīli literature. Given that cyclical history was clearly an important aspect of Ismaʿīli thought—one by which Ismaʿīlis understood their history as well as their present circumstances—a deep understanding and theorization of *fatra*, which clearly occupied a prominent place in the scheme of cyclical history, is necessary to a full understanding of how Ismaʿīli thinkers changed and adapted earlier doctrine in the face of the new challenges posed by the transition from revolutionary movement to established state.

In this section, I will discuss the evidence of an ongoing discussion of *fatra* in Ismaʿīli literature by focusing on two texts: the *K. al-ʿĀlim wa-l-ghulām*, attributed to Jaʿfar b. Manṣūr al-Yaman but likely written by his father, Ibn Hawshab, and Abū Ḥātim al-Rāzī's *K. al-Iṣlāḥ*. Although these texts represent two important developments in the conversation regarding the concept of *fatra* within the Ismaʿīli community, they are not all-encompassing. There are certainly more Ismaʿīli texts that discuss *fatarāt* either explicitly, using the term itself, or implicitly, by way of discussing the imam's quiescence. However, *K. al-ʿĀlim wa-l-ghulām* and *K. al-Iṣlāḥ* are the most robust such discussions and most relevant to an analysis of how this concept was later reimagined by the Fatimid missionary apparatus. They help underscore the differences between Fatimid and non-Fatimid approaches to the notion of *fatra*, particularly with respect to what Madelung termed “the Persian school”—that is, al-Nasafī, al-Rāzī, and al-Sijistānī.

Kitāb al-ʿĀlim wa-l-ghulām

Although the work is attributed to the same Jaʿfar b. Manṣūr al-Yaman who is considered the author of *K. al-Fatarāt wa-l-qirānāt*, modern scholarship generally agrees that the *K. al-ʿĀlim wa-l-ghulām* predates Jaʿfar's flourishing and is most likely a product of the pre-Fatimid Ismaʿīli community.³⁰ The text reveals that early in its anticipation of the return of Muḥammad b. Ismāʿīl as *mahdī*, the Ismaʿīli community saw the era of his absence as a *fatra*: a time in which the representative of God on earth has concealed himself from his

30 Hollenberg, “Interpretation”, p. 56; Ivanow, *Studies*, p. 62; Madelung, “Imamate”, p. 70. Morris, in his translation of Jaʿfar's *Master and Disciple*, p. 26, attributes the text to Jaʿfar but admits that it differs starkly in themes and content from his other texts and stipulates he would have to have written it in Yemen before his father's death. Gillon has begun to challenge some of Madelung's assessments of the authorship of these early Ismaʿīli texts, arguing that *K. al-Kashf* is a product of the earlier Fatimid milieu; see Gillon, *Book of Unveiling*.

adversaries but in which, crucially, his guidance remains accessible to his community.

The most relevant section comes at the end of the text, when the young protagonist, Ṣāliḥ, engages in discussion with the religious dignitary Abū Mālik. At this point in the narrative, Ṣāliḥ has completed his journey of religious seeking and reached a mastery of understanding that surpasses Abū Mālik's. Abū Mālik acts as a foil to Ṣāliḥ's perfect apprehension of the religious truths of early Isma'ili doctrine.

Abū Mālik asks Ṣāliḥ, "How can we come to know God's intermediaries, or even one of them, since we cannot go back to their time, and in this time of ours there are no longer any prophets or messengers as there once were in the communities before us?" Ṣāliḥ points out that saying that God has stopped sending prophets and messengers amounts to denying God's justice, and since there is no reason that those living in the current era should be excluded from God's justice, there must still be messengers and prophets by whom God guides humankind.

However, Abū Mālik is not convinced that God's messengers are still present:

That is simply part of God's wise judgement and *His accustomed way* with regard to us, just as *He acted with regard to those who came before us* (33:38) in the time of *the intervals* [*fatarāt*] (5:19) between one (divine) messenger and the next such as the interval which existed between *the (religious) community of Abraham* (2:130, 135) up until the period of Moses and the Torah (That's why) we (scholars) are acting according to the (conditions of) this interval, relying upon the surviving traces and custom (from the time of Muḥammad).³¹

Here, Abū Mālik thus asserts that living in a time of *fatra* with no prophet or messenger to guide the community justifies the authority of the religious scholars. Ṣāliḥ, meanwhile, condemns these same scholars as oppressors who have usurped the rightful place of the descendants of Muhammad—the true prophets and messengers of the era.

Ṣāliḥ's stance foreshadows a position that will become familiar in the discussion that follows: namely, that God did, in fact, send messengers after Muhammad and Abraham, but that in every age there are usurpers who claim leadership over the community in the alleged absence of those messengers.

³¹ Ja'far b. Manṣūr, *Master and Disciple*, p. 164. The emphases in the original denote quranic citations. Parenthetical insertions are Morris's.

However, God's messengers are never truly absent, as it would be a violation of God's justice to leave the community without a messenger to guide its members. Even when it appears that there is no messenger, in truth the mission is merely undergoing a period of concealment. Accordingly, Šāliḥ states, "The 'interval' [*fatra*] only refers to the *public* manifestation of the (divine) 'call' after the (period of) fear when they were calling (people to God) in secret and clandestinely (*kitmān*). Because the earth is never without a just witness from God for even a single blink of the eye, either publicly or openly, or *in fear* and concealment."³²

Abū Mālik asks Šāliḥ to explain the apparent absence of the prophets. Šāliḥ compares it to Moses's fleeing from Pharaoh and asks,

Which of God's just witnesses do you want to reveal himself (publicly) to you and to the people of your time? ... Is it a martyr that God should resurrect for you all after his death? ... Therefore (His just witness) has followed *God's accustomed way regarding* His prophets and *His messengers* in persevering patiently under persecution and in remaining hidden until God judges between him and us.³³

For Šāliḥ, whose viewpoint represents the Isma'ili beliefs of his day, the absence of Muḥammad b. Ismā'īl constitutes a *fatra* not because God has stopped sending representatives, but because the persecution of the Isma'ili mission is so intense that Muḥammad b. Ismā'īl cannot appear in public for his own safety. However, his concealment does not mean that his salvific guidance of the community has been cut off, as Abū Mālik erroneously believes.

K. al-Ālim wa-l-ghulām argues, then, that a *fatra* does not mean the literal absence of a prophet or imam from the community, as that would be a violation of God's justice. Rather, it is a time in which the prophetic mission is concealed to protect to the messengers of God from those who would either take advantage of their apparent absence or seek to harm them. The concept of *fatra* provided the early Isma'ili community with a useful and productive way to understand the apparent absence of the awaited *mahdī*, Muḥammad b. Ismā'īl, not only as a divinely ordained precautionary measure but also as a hardship similarly confronted and overcome by earlier prophets and their communities.

³² Ja'far b. Manṣūr, *Master and Disciple*, p. 165.

³³ Ja'far b. Manṣūr, *Master and Disciple*, p. 166.

Abū Ḥātim al-Rāzī's *Kitāb al-Iṣlāḥ*

Much of the previous scholarly discussion of *fatra* in Isma'ili thought is based on examinations of the work of the Isma'ili thinker Abū Ḥātim al-Rāzī (d. 322/934–5) and especially his best-known work, *K. al-Iṣlāḥ*, the later sections of which engage with the concept of *fatra*.³⁴ The theory of Madelung³⁵ and Halm³⁶ that al-Rāzī was among those Isma'ilis who did not pledge allegiance to the Fatimid imam and instead remained loyal to Muḥammad b. Ismā'il has been widely accepted, and it is therefore through the lens of anti-Fatimid rhetoric that his discussion of *fatra* has been read. In this section, I do not position my argument against this scholarly consensus, which I consider sound; rather, I highlight some key points in al-Rāzī's discussion that will be particularly salient when I turn in the following section to the ways in which *K. al-Fatarāt wa-l-qirānāt* may be responding to it.

Al-Rāzī wrote *K. al-Iṣlāḥ* as a refutation of *K. al-Maḥṣūl*, the summa of his intellectual predecessor and foundational Isma'ili philosopher Muḥammad al-Nasafi (d. 332/943). In many cases, al-Rāzī presents a quotation from al-Nasafi's work and then discusses at length why he believes al-Nasafi was incorrect. The concept of *fatra* is no exception. Al-Rāzī describes it primarily in his discussion of the biographies of the prophets, where he argues, contra al-Nasafi, that figures such as Zakariah, Shu'ayb, and Lūṭ were not imams, as Isma'ilis of this time considered them to be, but rather held the lower ranks of *lawāḥiq* and *mustawda'in* during a period of *fatra*. It is only at the very end of the work that readers get the briefest definition of what a *fatra* actually is, though al-Rāzī alludes to it frequently throughout *K. al-Iṣlāḥ*: he characterizes it as a period in which the imam is absent (*ghaybat al-imām*) or in which there is no completer-imam (*mutimm*). Although he leaves the circumstances that would result in the imam's absence open to interpretation, al-Rāzī discusses the events that transpire during that absence in detail.

The most immediate and obvious consequence of al-Rāzī's demotion of Shu'ayb, Zakariah, and other figures from imam to *lāḥiq* is that it renders the end of each prophetic cycle a period of *fatra*: "No [prophetic cycle] ends without a *fatra*."³⁷ Thus when a prophetic cycle ends, its final imam is no longer present to hand off the prophethood to the *nāṭiq* of the next cycle. Instead,

34 Nomoto, "Early Isma'ili Thought", pp. 140–156, offers the most detailed examination of *fatra* in al-Rāzī's thought; however, al-Rāzī's discussion of *fatra* is also briefly discussed in Madelung's "Imamate", pp. 120–121; Halm's *Empire of the Mahdi*, pp. 378–379; and Hollenberg's *Beyond the Qur'an*, pp. 23–24.

35 Madelung, "Imamate", pp. 118–130.

36 Halm, *Empire of the Mahdi*, pp. 288–297.

37 Al-Rāzī, *al-Iṣlāḥ*, p. 326.

the prophetic message is left in the hands of the *lāḥiq*. This *lāḥiq* is the one responsible for identifying the next *nāṭiq* and for protecting the community of believers from corruption during the *fatra*.

Al-Rāzī's intervention may seem rather abstract, but it has implications for his view of the status of the Isma'ili mission in his own time. Although his discussion of the *fatra* does not mention the Fatimids explicitly, it is widely accepted that Isma'ili thinkers in general used stories of previous prophetic cycles to understand and justify their present circumstances.³⁸ Since al-Rāzī holds that every era ends with a *fatra*, this has to be true of his own era as well. Thus, if Muḥammad b. Ismā'īl is absent and the Isma'ili community is in an era of *fatra* as it awaits his reappearance as the *mahdī* and *nāṭiq* of the seventh cycle, for the present moment the *lawāḥiq* are the proper leaders of the Isma'ili community. Al-Rāzī did not consider the Fatimids to be these *lawāḥiq*; instead, he likely thought of himself in this role.³⁹

Further, some of the Isma'ilis who did not accept Fatimid rule believed that the *mahdī* Muḥammad b. Ismā'īl would not bring a new law, as the other prophets had, but rather would abrogate Islamic law, ushering in an era in which people would worship God through knowledge alone, without works.⁴⁰ Therefore, once Muḥammad b. Ismā'īl has appeared, so, too, has this time of knowledge without works. Al-Rāzī used the concept of *fatra* to avoid the conclusion that this seventh cycle in which Islamic law is abrogated had indeed begun with the appearance of Muḥammad b. Ismā'īl. His counterargument was that Muḥammad b. Ismā'īl had disappeared and that it was only upon his reappearance that the *fatra* would end and the seventh cycle begin.⁴¹ Whereas al-Nasafi held that the seventh cycle had begun in spite of Muḥammad b. Ismā'īl's (temporary) absence, for al-Rāzī Muḥammad b. Ismā'īl's absence indicated that the current era was one of *fatra* before the beginning of the seventh cycle.⁴²

In sum, al-Rāzī argues that the *fatra* that defined the early Isma'ili movement persisted even after the establishment of the Fatimid state and the accession of 'Abdallāh al-Mahdī as imam. In stark contrast, *K. al-Fatarāt*

38 Hollenberg, *Beyond the Qur'ān*, pp. 34–35, 111–112; Nomoto, "Early Ismā'īlī Thought", pp. 294–295.

39 Hollenberg, *Beyond the Qur'ān*, p. 23; Halm, *Empire of the Mahdi*, p. 378.

40 Madelung, "Imamate", pp. 118–123; al-Rāzī, *al-Is'lāḥ*, pp. 63–64. According to al-Sijistānī, only the religious laws that veil ultimate truth, such as those prescribing fasting, alms, and prayer, would be abrogated after the advent of al-Qā'im; *Ithbāt al-nubuwwāt*, pp. 272–283.

41 Madelung, "Imamate", p. 121; Halm, *Empire of the Mahdi*, p. 378; Hollenberg, *Beyond the Qur'ān*, pp. 22–23.

42 Madelung, "Imamate", p. 119.

wa-l-qirānāt claims that no such a *fatra* had ever occurred in the first place. In the following section, I will explore the ways in which the discussion of *fatra* in *K. al-Fatarāt wa-l-qirānāt* engages with earlier conceptions even as it develops a new understanding of the history of the early Ismaʿīli movement.

The Discussion of *Fatarāt* in *K. al-Fatarāt wa-l-qirānāt*

Establishing the authorship and date of composition of *K. al-Fatarāt wa-l-qirānāt* has been a problem without a clear solution for many decades of Western scholarship on Ismaʿilism, as all currently available manuscripts of the work date from the nineteenth century or later and show evidence of revision at least until 447/1055, perhaps even later.⁴³ Muḥammad Kāmil Ḥusayn believed that the text was purely a product of the fifth/eleventh century,⁴⁴ although both Halm and Hollenberg posit, more cautiously, that the various layers of the text could have been composed at different times—some perhaps as early as the North African period, others as late as al-Ḥākim and al-Kirmānī.⁴⁵

Without earlier manuscripts, we are left to date the work on the basis of the chronology of various changes to Fatimid doctrine. However, the collective historical range of the events and beliefs discernible in the text (such as the genealogy of the Fatimid imams, the status of Muḥammad b. Ismāʿīl, the use of Neoplatonic philosophy and distinct terminology, and specific dates and events⁴⁶) extends beyond the lifetime of any one individual, ranging from the establishment of the Fatimid state to the reign of al-Mustansir (r. 427–87/1036–94). Thus, Halm's position—that the latest *terminus ante quem* is around 447/1055, although portions of the text may date from as early as the late part of al-Manṣūr's reign (r. 334–41/946–53) or the earliest days of al-Muʿizz's

43 Halm speculated, on the basis of evidence found in a manuscript possessed by Paul Kraus that Halm himself did not have access to, that the text may have been edited or expanded by the Ṭayyibīs; see “Zur Datierung”, p. 92.

44 Halm, “Zur Datierung”, p. 92.

45 The presence of Neoplatonic material in *K. al-Fatarāt wa-l-qirānāt* and current theories regarding when Neoplatonism was accepted by the Fatimids complicate this picture. See Stern, “Earliest Cosmological Doctrines”; Madelung, “Imamate”; Hollenberg, “Neoplatonism in Pre-Kirmānian Fāṭimid Doctrine”, pp. 160–163; Halm, *Kosmologie und Heilslehre*; idem, “Zur Datierung”, pp. 101–105; De Smet, “Les bibliothèques ismaéliennes”; idem, “*Risāla al-Mudhhiba*”. *R. al-Mudhhiba* and *K. al-Fatarāt wa-l-qirānāt* seem to share a number of noteworthy thematic and stylistic features, as well as the puzzle of their authorship.

46 Madelung, “Imamate”, p. 117; Halm, “Zur Datierung”, pp. 104–106; Hollenberg, “Interpretation”, pp. 56–66.

(r. 341–365/953–975)—seems reasonable, albeit not beyond debate. I would argue, in partial agreement with both Halm and De Smet,⁴⁷ that the bulk of the text was composed during the reign of al-Mu‘izz, with significant later edits and emendations.

Further complicating the picture, *K. al-Fatarāt wa-l-qirānāt* shows marked differences from other texts that can more assertively be attributed to Ja‘far b. Maṣṣūr al-Yaman. Most notable is the text’s inclusion of Neoplatonic themes, which Halm argues do not appear in Ja‘far’s known works because his writings predate the acceptance of Neoplatonism by the Fatimid establishment.⁴⁸

We are thus left with two possibilities. The first is that the work’s attribution to Ja‘far b. Maṣṣūr al-Yaman reflects a later Isma‘ili tradition in which he became a legendary figure, more prominent even than al-Qāḍi al-Nu‘mān,⁴⁹ this could have happened, as Hollenberg argues, because *K. al-Fatarāt wa-l-qirānāt* shared some elements with other texts attributed to Ja‘far.⁵⁰ The other possibility, put forward by Halm, is that Ja‘far was the author of some of the earliest parts of the text, which were composed during the North African period under al-Manṣūr or in the beginning of the reign of al-Mu‘izz, but that he was not the work’s sole author.⁵¹ Given the current state of scholarship on Ja‘far’s body of work, it is not possible at present to make conclusive claims about his role in the creation of *K. al-Fatarāt wa-l-qirānāt*, but its earliest components could certainly have been written during the time of Ja‘far’s flourishing.⁵²

K. al-Fatarāt wa-l-qirānāt as it exists in the currently available manuscripts is divided into four parts (*ajzāʾ*, sing. *juzʾ*) of unequal length containing named chapters (*faṣl*) that cover a wide range of topics: prophetic history from Adam to the Qāʾim, sibylline prophecies regarding events before and during the reign of the Fatimids, cosmology and lettrism, *taʾwīl* (esoteric interpretation) of the Quran and of facets of nature, components of religious praxis such as prayer

47 De Smet, “*Risāla al-Mudhhiba*”, p. 334 n. 19. See also De Smet’s statement on p. 315 of the same article that “Ismaili works in general, and those transmitted by the Syrian Nizāris in particular, have undergone substantial modification over the centuries, made worse at times by corruption due to the vagaries of manuscript transmission.” This is certainly the case with the available manuscripts of *K. al-Fatarāt wa-l-qirānāt*.

48 Halm, *Empire of the Mahdi*, p. 297.

49 Al-Jawdhari, *Sīrat al-Ustādh Jawdhar*, p. 140; Hollenberg, “Interpretation”, p. 55 n. 86.

50 Hollenberg, “Interpretation”, p. 65.

51 Halm, “Zur Datierung”, pp. 91–92, 105–107.

52 Gillon has recently proposed a theory of “multiple Ja‘fars”: either multiple authors with different voices contributed to the corpus traditionally attributed to Ja‘far b. Maṣṣūr al-Yaman, or his perspective underwent a significant change around the time of al-Mu‘izz. Gillon, *Book of Unveiling*, pp. 55–59.

and fasting, and even varieties of jinn. Some topics, such as the prophetic lineage and prophecies, are covered multiple times, others only once.

In stark contrast to both *K. al-Ālim wa-l-ghulām* and *K. al-Iṣlāḥ*, *K. al-Fatarāt wa-l-qirānāt* dedicates a great deal of space to explaining the etymology, causes, and consequences of *fatarāt*; they feature prominently in the work's title, and an entire chapter is dedicated to the topic. Titled "On the Occurrence of the *Fatarāt* During the Cycles", the chapter is found in the second part of the text, following a chapter that covers the *nuṭaqā'*, their *usus*, and their *atimmā'*; various letters associated with each, and their lifespans and burial places; the concealment of the *da'wa* during the time of Muḥammad b. Ismā'īl and the need for a *nāṭiq* and a *ṣāmīt* (lit. "silent," another term for *asās* and *waṣī*) in each cycle. It is followed by a chapter on the completer-imams, with *ta'wīl* of verses from the Quran that point to their names.

The chapter on *fatarāt* opens with the author seemingly acknowledging that other works discuss periods of *fatra* without adequately explaining their causes and consequences; he thus sets out to correct the doubt that has "afflicted the intellects of some people".⁵³ It seems that the community was aware that such a thing as a *fatra* could happen, had happened in the past (perhaps even that it had been used to explain their own recent past), and in fact would *inevitably* happen as a consequence of its being a natural fact of cyclical history, but the community members were not clear on what this interruption entailed or why it took place.

The *K. al-Fatarāt wa-l-qirānāt* explains the etymology of the term *fatra* and lays out five different reasons that a *fatra* might occur, ranging from the mundane to the metaphysically complex. These explanations often contradict each other and seem to represent a wide range of opinions on *fatarāt* drawn from discussions in *da'wa* literature, some known and extant and others that may yet be discovered. In this section, I argue that these contradictory accounts of *fatarāt* are not a problem to be solved but rather an indication that the text is not concerned with presenting a unified theory of why *fatarāt* occur. Rather, its priority was to present a collection of opinions demonstrating that the current era—that of the Prophet Muhammad and the Fatimid imams—was the pinnacle of a prophetic lineage that had been trending upward since the beginning of time. In this way, the concept of *fatra*, which had in the pre-Fatimid era been used to explain the awaited *mahdī*'s absence, was recast as an obsolete concept no longer applicable to the Fatimid era, which is not

53 *K. al-Fatarāt*, fol. 113.

one of imminent eschatological expectations but rather one of unending stability and continuity—a stark change from the understanding of *fatra* present in the non-Fatimid works of thinkers such as al-Rāzī and al-Sijistānī.

Fatra: Absence or Quiescence?

A major question for the Ismaʿīli community seems to have been whether a time of *fatra* necessarily entailed the physical absence of the imam, or merely his quiescence. In *K. al-ʿĀlim wa-l-ghulām*, discussed above, we saw that the argument between Ṣāliḥ and Abū Mālik hinged on the difference between Abū Mālik's belief that God had left humankind without a representative and Ṣāliḥ's argument that each prophet was followed by a line of imams who guided the community and that if such a representative appeared absent, it was only because he was hiding out of fear for his life.

Both of these two viewpoints—that the imam is absent and that the imam is quiescent—seem to be in play in *K. al-Fatarāt wa-l-qirānāt*, likewise indicating that this may at one point have been an open question for the Ismaʿīli community, particularly when it awaited Muḥammad b. Ismāʿīl. The discussion on *fatarāt* begins by presenting such intervals as logically necessary since the lifespans of the seven imams in any given prophetic cycle could not account for the 1,500 years that a cycle could take to complete:

If [a thinking person] were to consider the number of imams between each *nātiq* and the next in the amount of time between each cycle, they would find that the amount of time is lengthy, longer than what the number of imams permits, ... since the amount of time between each cycle may be 1,500 years. If [this length of time] is divided among seven individuals, [at least] one of them must reach the age of 100 or even more, and this is outside the lifespan of a human being. As for either increasing the number of imams so that it is possible for the [line of] imams to extend throughout it or shortening the amount of time from what we described, the time period falls at this length and it is not possible to shorten it, and exceeding the number [of imams] beyond seven degrades what the doctrine is based on. Thus it must be the case that there is a *fatra*, because one demands a way out of this dilemma, and there is no other way out of it.⁵⁴

54 *K. al-Fatarāt*, fol. 113.

Because the cycle cannot be shorter, nor can the number of imams in a cycle be greater, the inevitable conclusion is that there is a time in which no imam is physically present.

Similarly, the text defends its understanding of *fatra* as absence rather than quiescence by analogizing it to the fact that the *nuṭaqāʾ* themselves did not appear in continuous succession:

As for the cause for [the *fatra*'s] occurrence, it is that the particular resembles the universal—the universal being the *nuṭaqāʾ*, who did not come in uninterrupted, continuous succession. Occasionally the time that we mentioned occurs between the appearance of one of them and the next—they being the *nuṭaqāʾ*. The imams being their particulars, it is necessary that the same phenomenon occurs among them—namely, the cutting off of the imamate from the world for a period of time, like the cutting off of the *nāṭiqate* for a time. However, the cutting off of the imamate is shorter and less significant than is the cutting off of the *nāṭiqate*.⁵⁵

The *nuṭaqāʾ*, as mentioned in the earlier discussion on the Ismaʿili theory of cyclical history, do not appear one right after another. Rather, each *nāṭiq* is followed by an elaborate hierarchy of his descendants and their appointed aides, who lead the community following his inevitable death. That the time between *nuṭaqāʾ* is also considered a *fatra* is mentioned in Jaʿfar's *K. al-Kashf*, where the setting of the sun is likened to the time between one *nāṭiq* and the next.⁵⁶

The imams as the particulars of the *nuṭaqāʾ* participate in their responsibilities: they “command the good and prohibit the evil” and they act as the conduit of divine support for the community. Since they mirror the *nuṭaqāʾ*, it is also necessary that their sequence be interrupted like that of the *nuṭaqāʾ* is, albeit for a shorter period of time; in contrast to than the millennia between *nuṭaqāʾ*, the imamate is cut off for decades or centuries. The *fatra* between the last imam of the era of Jesus and the appearance of Muhammad, for example, was one of the longest such periods, at over 600 years. The author of *K. al-Fatarāt wa-l-qirānāt* also mentions the long *fatra* that occurred before the appearance of Zakariah, who preceded Jesus: “[Zakariah] was established in the rank

55 *K. al-Fatarāt*, fols 114–115.

56 Jaʿfar b. Manṣūr, *al-Kashf*, p. 82, trans. Gillon, *Book of Unveiling*, pp. 230–231. *K. al-Kashf* has a complex redaction, and the validity of its attribution to Jaʿfar b. Manṣūr al-Yaman cannot be confirmed or denied at present. Gillon's *Book of Unveiling* offers a translation, commentary, and detailed historical study of the text.

of the imamate following the long *fatra* and the cutting off of the imamate from the world for an extended period of time.”⁵⁷

On the other hand, the idea of the *fatra* as denoting the quiescence of the imam is likewise emphasized throughout the text. In one of the most frequently quoted lines from *K. al-Fatarāt wa-l-qirānāt*,⁵⁸ the author states, “The imamate cannot be cut off from the world for even the blink of an eye, because it is the proof [of God] for creation; rather, he [the imam] does not command the good nor prohibit the evil.”⁵⁹ Here, the *fatra* is conceived of as the imam’s quiescence rather than his physical absence from the world: the phrase “command the good and prohibit the evil” is commonly used as a byword for the legislative duties of the imam—that is, his responsibility to guide the community by informing them of what has been made licit and illicit by God. In not performing this most basic aspect of his duty, he is “cut off” not in the form of a literal absence but through the absence of his guidance for the community. Although he is still physically present, he is in isolation (*infirād*) and unable to act as a conduit of divine support: “God ordained the cutting off of the imamate by the isolation of the imam from the world and his silence, so divine inspiration (*ta’yid*) ceased to flow from him to [the community].”⁶⁰

The *K. al-Fatarāt wa-l-qirānāt* does not conclusively establish whether the imam is absent or merely quiescent during a *fatra*, but in either case the effect for the community is the same, as its members are unable to access the salvific support that the imam provides. The book’s presentation of both viewpoints may indicate that this was an open debate in the early stages of Isma‘īlī doctrinal development. Even if it had been resolved in favour of the quiescence interpretation by the time the text of *K. al-Fatarāt wa-l-qirānāt* in its present form was codified, it would ultimately have been a moot point, for as will be discussed further in this section, the author argues that the very concept of *fatra* is obsolete in the uniquely blessed era of Fatimid rule. However, he first

57 *K. al-Fatarāt*, f. 117.

58 Quotations from *K. al-Fatarāt wa-l-qirānāt* are found in *R. al-Uṣūl wa-l-aḥkām* by Abū l-Ma‘ālī b. ‘Imrān (d. c.497/1104) as well as in vol. 1 of *Majmū‘ al-tarbiya* by Muḥammad b. Tāhir b. Ibrāhīm al-Ḥarīthī (d. 584/1188) and *R. al-Waḥīda fī tathbīt arkān al-‘aqīda*, attributed to the eighth Ṭayyibī *dā‘ī muṭlaq* al-Ḥusayn b. ‘Alī b. al-Walīd (d. 667/1268–9); see Poonawala, *Biobibliography of Ismā‘īlī Literature*, pp. 73–74. Idrīs ‘Imād al-Dīn (d. 872/1468) also quotes *K. al-Fatarāt wa-l-qirānāt* in the seventh volume of his *‘Uyūn al-Akhbār* (translated in *Fātimids and Their Successors*, p. 372). Ḥasan b. Nūḥ al-Bhārūchī (d. 939/1533) mentions *K. al-Fatarāt wa-l-qirānāt* in his literary catalogue *K. al-Azhār*; see Cortese, *Arabic Manuscripts*.

59 *K. al-Fatarāt*, fol. 116.

60 *K. al-Fatarāt*, fol. 114.

raises the stakes of *fatra* for his audience by emphasizing the unprecedented salvific benefits of the end of *fatarāt* at the hands of the Fatimid rulers.

Elevation of the Rank of Imam

The section on *fatra* in *K. al-Fatarāt wa-l-qirānāt* also serves to aggrandize the rank of imam. According to the author, only individuals who hold the rank of *nāṭiq*, *waṣī*, or imam are recipients of *ta'yīd*, or divine inspiration; therefore, if the imam is cut off from the world during a time of *fatra*, the community no longer has access to *ta'yīd*. The limitation of these powers to the upper echelons of the spiritual hierarchy heightens the importance of the imam and the consequences of his absence during a *fatra*, since lower-ranking leaders cannot act as independent conduits of *ta'yīd*.

This cutting off of divine inspiration is often described in *K. al-Fatarāt wa-l-qirānāt* as a hallmark of a *fatra* period: "Fatigue and weariness attach to particular souls in the corporeal world because of their inability to receive the designated divine inspiration for a time. Then this weariness lifts, and a pure soul appears to whom divine inspiration is transmitted above others. This is [one] meaning of *fatra*."⁶¹ However, the text does not offer a clear definition of this divine inspiration; it merely describes it as "that with which each *nāṭiq* endows the imams of his era, so that by its transmission it will give them the power to protect what God has entrusted them with."⁶² We learn from this, at least, that divine inspiration is a power properly belonging to the *nuṭaqā'*, who then bestow it on the imams. To gain a clearer picture of what is at stake in the cutting off of divine inspiration, it is beneficial to explore other sources, as the intended readers of the text would likely have a working definition of *ta'yīd* in mind, pieced together from other Isma'ili literature.

For al-Sijistānī, for example, *ta'yīd* denotes perfect access to the Universal Intellect and the ultimate truths of the spiritual world that it embodies. It is by way of *ta'yīd* that the *nāṭiq* is able to comprehend the ultimate truth without the mediation of the signs and symbols that make up relative truth and on which the rest of humankind relies.⁶³ Without access to the ultimate truth of the celestial realm, through mediation or directly, it is not possible for the particular souls of humans to ascend back to the spiritual realm. *Ta'yīd*, then, is a salvific vehicle for particular souls: if access to *ta'yīd* is cut off, they have no means by which to escape the material, corporeal world and attain salvation in the spiritual world. It is perhaps for this reason that al-Sijistānī insists that

61 *K. al-Fatarāt*, fol. 114.

62 *K. al-Fatarāt*, fol. 119.

63 Walker, *Early Philosophical Shiism*, pp. 117–118.

the *lawāḥiq* and the other lower ranks also enjoy access to divine inspiration through the *nuṭaqāʾ*. Consequently, in times of *fatra*, the lower ranks maintain the link with the ultimate truth of the spiritual world for the salvation of the rest of humankind.⁶⁴

Among other texts attributed to Jaʿfar b. Manṣūr al-Yaman, *Sarāʾir wa-asrār al-nuṭaqāʾ* confirms that divine inspiration represents a privileged connection to God and the spiritual world. This inspiration is not bestowed by other corporeal beings but rather by celestial intermediaries acting on behalf of the Universal Intellect: “None of the *nuṭaqāʾ* (peace be upon them) received *taʾyīd* from a human form, have [divine] resources [*mawādd*] attach to them from corporeal creation, or have a mother or father on the spiritual level. They were supported by the Intellect and the Soul, which connected with them through the three intermediaries mentioned in the book [i.e. Jadd, Faṭḥ, and Khayāl].”⁶⁵

This flow of divine inspiration from the spiritual world to the *nuṭaqāʾ* is confirmed elsewhere in *K. al-Fatarāt wa-l-qirānāt*, but here the author uses the term “Follower” (*tālī*) for the Soul: “The *nāṭiq* apprehended what the Follower inspired him with and pronounced [*naṭāqa*] it.”⁶⁶ This inspiration consists of “the meanings of His revelation and the interpretation [*taʾwīl*] of His law”—that is, the ultimate truths of in the spiritual world. The seven imams are analogized with the seven planetary spheres, and the *nāṭiq* and the *asās* with the sphere of the zodiac and the encompassing sphere; in the same way that there is movement from the Soul to the planetary spheres, there is a flow of *taʾyīd* from the *nāṭiq* and the *asās* to the seven imams.⁶⁷ The examples of al-Sijistānī and other texts attributed to Jaʿfar b. Manṣūr al-Yaman thus show that *taʾyīd* represents a connection to the spiritual world of ultimate truth that is unique to the *nuṭaqāʾ* and which they bestow on the imams.

However, there is a key difference: for al-Sijistānī as well as for al-Rāzī, access to *taʾyīd* is bestowed also on the lower ranks—the *lawāḥiq*, the *ajniḥa*, and so on. An example of this can be found in al-Sijistānī’s *Sullam al-najāt*, where he

64 Al-Sijistānī speaks having himself received *taʾyīd* from God at the beginning of *Sullam al-najāt*, p. 4.

65 Jaʿfar b. Manṣūr, *Sarāʾir wa-asrār al-nuṭaqāʾ*, p. 25, trans. Hollenberg, “Interpretation”, p. 235. Although Hollenberg translates *mawādd* as “[divine] resources”, his study of the term connects it closely with the concept of *taʾyīd* in that both flow from the higher to the lower ranks and both provide spiritual support and/or knowledge for the *nāṭiq* and other members of the hierarchy. Thus, *mawādd* might also be cogently translated as “emanations” or “influxes”. For further discussion of Jaʿfar’s particular use of the term, see Hollenberg, “Interpretation”, pp. 287–293. On the triad of Jadd, Faṭḥ, and Khayāl, see note 68 below.

66 *K. al-Fatarāt*, fol. 109.

67 *K. al-Fatarāt*, fols. 72–73.

equates God's granting Solomon power over the wind in Quran 38:36 with the power granted to the *mahdī* (presumably Muḥammad b. Ismā'īl) during his absence to "make his imagination⁶⁸ flow through his *lawāḥiq* when he desires so, thereby inspiring them".⁶⁹ Likewise, for al-Rāzī, the *lawāḥiq* are not only recipients of *ta'yīd* but empowered to determine doctrines that, though not tantamount to divine law, are nevertheless normative for the community.⁷⁰ However, within the *K. al-Fatarāt wa-l-qirānāt*, access to *ta'yīd* stops with the imams, and so a period of *fatra* in which the imam is inaccessible to the community means that the salvific vehicle of *ta'yīd* is likewise unavailable.

The text repeatedly affirms the connection between the cutting off of the imamate and the cutting off of divine inspiration: "God the Great and Mighty determined the name of the *fatra* in the four eras by the cutting off of the divine inspiration with which the imams are endowed."⁷¹ The position embraced in *K. al-Fatarāt wa-l-qirānāt* that only *nuṭaqā'*, *awṣiyyā'*, and imams can receive divine inspiration stands in contrast to the stances of al-Rāzī and al-Sijistānī, who both state that divine inspiration can be accessed by all the ranks of the hierarchy, including the *lawāḥiq*. Thus *K. al-Fatarāt wa-l-qirānāt* seems to privilege the upper ranks by making them the only holders of divine inspiration. From its perspective, then, the absence of the imam is more serious a matter than it would be if the community continued to enjoy access to the salvific divine inspiration in his absence.

The severe consequences for the *da'wa* of the cutting off of divine inspiration are also discussed:

God ordained the cutting off of the imamate by the isolation of the imam from the world and his silence,⁷² so divine inspiration ceased to flow from him to [the community]. The cutting off of divine support to the world [caused] the perplexity of the *lawāḥiq* regarding the *da'wa*, and in this perplexity regarding the *da'wa* is the darkness of the *ajniḥa*, and in the darkness of the *ajniḥa* is the cutting off of the *da'wa* from the seekers. This perspective leads to revenge and drought, trials and tribulations, and the destruction of the hypocrites and those who are arrogant towards the

68 *Khayāl*, "imagination", is a technical term in Isma'ili cosmology, part of the divine triad of Jadd, Fath, and Khayāl; see Halm, *Kosmologie und Heilslehre*, pp. 67–74 and De Smet, "La fonction noétique".

69 Al-Sijistānī, *Sullam al-najāt*, p. 79.

70 Al-Rāzī, *K. al-Iṣlāḥ*, pp. 153–156.

71 *K. al-Fatarāt*, fol. 119. See also the passage quoted above at note 60.

72 Alternatively, "God silenced him".

Friends of God; {this is for what your hands sent forth, and because God wrongs not His servants}.⁷³

According to the text, the cutting off of divine inspiration causes a chain reaction of perplexity (*ḥayra*) that ripples through the ranks of the *da'wa*: without access to divine support, the lower ranks and indeed all those who seek to participate in the *da'wa* find themselves in dire straits. The absence of divine inspiration not only ruins the community spiritually; the mention of drought seems to indicate that it has repercussions in all areas of life. For al-Rāzī, by contrast, the problem for the *da'wa* during times of *fatra* lies not in the cutting off of the divine support but rather in the fact that the *lawāḥiq*, in spite of their ongoing connection to divine support, are susceptible to corruption, on the one hand, and incompetence in leadership, on the other.

Since al-Rāzī and others hold that the lower ranks continue to transmit divine inspiration even in times of *fatra*, they see an ongoing possibility of salvation, though one that is open to “only a few members of the community.”⁷⁴ By contrast, the author of *K. al-Fatarāt wa-l-qirānāt* seems to deny any chance of salvation during a *fatra*. From his perspective, then, the fact that the Fatimid era has brought about the end of *fatarāt* represents a tremendous blessing for the Isma'ili community: never again will it be cut off from the salvific divine inspiration. This innovation in the Isma'ili understanding of *fatarāt* will be discussed in the following section.

The Era of Muhammad and the End of Fatarāt

The discussion on *fatarāt* in *K. al-Fatarāt wa-l-qirānāt* concludes that although there had been periods of *fatra* in all prior prophetic cycles, *fatarāt* ceased with the advent of the cycle of Muhammad. This cessation, the author explains, is the culmination of a gradual decline in the number of *fatarāt* in each cycle: the cycle of Noah had four *fatarāt*, the cycle of Abraham had three, the cycle of Moses had two, and the cycle of Jesus had only one. Because the number of *fatarāt* in a given cycle corresponds with the number of divine laws remaining until the seventh cycle, in which there would be no need for law at all, and because there is no divine law after Muhammad, it follows that there are no *fatarāt* during the era of Muhammad. The author agrees with al-Rāzī, and indeed with the earliest Isma'ili belief system, that the era of the seventh *nāṭiq* involves no new law, but the implications he draws from this point are quite different. For al-Rāzī, the assumption that the era of the *mahdī* would be one

73 *K. al-Fatarāt*, fols 115–116. The quotation at the end is from Quran 8:51.

74 Al-Rāzī, *K. al-Isḥāḥ*, p. 326.

without law was the reason he insisted that his own era was one of *fatra*, since the *mahdī*'s era could not yet have begun. But from the pro-Fatimid perspective of *K. al-Fatarāt wa-l-qirānāt*, the same belief indicates the opposite—namely, that there will be no *fatarāt* during the era of Muhammad, which has not yet come to an end.

Further, the text argues that since Muhammad's prophethood the imamate has been continuously held by his descendants:

As for the era of the Messenger of God (peace be upon him), the *fatarāt* have ceased during his era because of the transmission of the imamate to the best of his descendants, one after another. [God] endowed him specially with the {seven}⁷⁵ caliphs who complete [his cycle], {oft-repeated}, exalting his station and ennobling his virtue. There is no cutting off of the imams in his era as there was in eras prior, so from this perspective there is no *fatra* during his era; *fatarāt* occurred only in the eras of the other *nuṭaqā*.⁷⁶

Since the cycle of Muhammad has not yet come to an end, the author implies that the unbroken sequence of imams continues through the Fatimid era. The Fatimid rulers represent the “oft-repeated” cycle of seven imams that is unique to the era of Muhammad: instead of the cycle ending after the seventh imam, as it had in all other prophetic cycles, another cycle of seven follows. This phenomenon is described in *K. al-Fatarāt wa-l-qirānāt* thus:

The virtue of the Messenger of God (peace be upon him) is that God made him an intercessor for his community and multiplied the intercession for him, making it fourteen and a great cycle. God the Exalted said: {Certainly We have given you the seven oft-repeated and the great Quran}. The {oft-repeated} is seven and seven; and so the first cycle of the {oft-repeated} is that of the completer-imams, who are completed by the seventh, Muḥammad b. Ismāʿīl.⁷⁷

Here the phrase “fourteen and a great cycle” is a play on the quranic verse “We have given you the seven oft-repeated and the great Quran,”⁷⁸ which is commonly understood by the broader Muslim community to refer to the *ḥaṭiḥa*, the

⁷⁵ The author is here referencing Quran 15:87, as discussed below.

⁷⁶ *K. al-Fatarāt*, fol. 118.

⁷⁷ *K. al-Fatarāt*, fols 33–34.

⁷⁸ Quran 15:87.

first seven verses of the Quran that are recited at the beginning of any religious activity, making them “oft-repeated”. However, here the author takes the “seven oft-repeated” to refer to the repeated cycles of seven imams in the Prophet Muhammad’s era. Instead of seven imams, as in each prior cycle, Muhammad’s cycle contains fourteen imams, which makes it “a great cycle”. The first cycle of seven, the reader is to understand, consists of seven imams who are immediate descendants of Muhammad, the last being Muḥammad b. Ismāʿīl; the second cycle consists of the Fatimid imams, whose genealogical connection to Muḥammad b. Ismāʿīl is never fully established.

Although this passage seems to indicate that fourteen is the maximum number of imams in Muhammad’s era, the historical reality, and indeed the rest of the text of *K. al-Fatarāt wa-l-qirānāt*, complicates that picture. The first Fatimid imam to rule openly, ‘Abdallāh al-Mahdī, is regarded not as the first but as the *fourth* imam of the second cycle. Prior to the establishment of the Fatimid state, as mentioned earlier, the Ismaʿīli movement was led by its founder, ‘Abdallāh the Elder, and then by his son and grandson. These three figures were recast in later official Fatimid doctrine as the first three Fatimid imams who ruled in a period of concealment dictated by Abbasid persecution. This period would fit the basic definition of a *fatra* as laid out in *K. al-Fatarāt wa-l-qirānāt*, but the book does not in fact consider it a *fatra*, since it fell within the era of Muhammad during which no such *fatarāt* were possible. So although the concept of *fatra* was central to the Ismaʿīlis’ understanding of this period of their history at the time, later Fatimid literature seems to have found it more expedient to do away with the idea that the Fatimids’ dynastic succession might face such obstacles again.

At the time the bulk of *K. al-Fatarāt wa-l-qirānāt* was composed, the Fatimid caliphate was being ruled by the third of ‘Abdallāh al-Mahdī’s descendants, al-Muʿizz—the fourteenth of the fourteen promised imams. The prospect that al-Muʿizz would nonetheless not pass the torch to the long-awaited *mahdī* at the end of his reign seems to be reflected in *K. al-Fatarāt wa-l-qirānāt*, which shows that the author felt a need to rework the earlier interpretation of the “seven oft-repeated” to accommodate a larger number of imams. For example, in many places in the text, he refers to the rulers after al-Muʿizz by their numerical place within that *second* cycle—al-Ḥākim is “the ninth”, al-Mustanṣir “the eleventh”—without reference to the early idea of a maximum of seven imams per cycle.⁷⁹

79 See *K. al-Fatarāt wa-l-qirānāt*, fols 49, 120, 149, etc. That *K. al-Fatarāt wa-l-qirānāt* is attributed to Jaʿfar b. Maṣṣūr al-Yaman but nevertheless contains references to caliphs who ruled after his death indicates that although the bulk of the text likely dates to the era of al-Muʿizz, it underwent later additions and interpolations. The same applies to many

The idea of maintaining the strict scheme of seven-imam cycles that had characterized early Ismaʿili thought seems to have been abandoned as early as the time of ʿAbdallāh al-Mahdī. In a letter he sent to the Yemeni Ismaʿili community between 308/920 and 322/934 to address questions raised by his appearance as the *mahdī* and leader of the Fatimid state, he responds to the concern that his lineage had already exceeded the limit of seven imams in the cycle of Muhammad by stating: “[The imams] are seven steps that succeed one another the same way that the days [of the week] succeed one another; in them there will be as many imams as God wills, until all of a sudden the speaker (*nāṭiq*) appears when God Almighty desires.”⁸⁰ Far from anticipating the end of the cycle of Muhammad after the fourteenth imam, the text thus portrays the cycle of Fatimid imams as continuing indefinitely, with no predicted conclusion.

The cycle of Muhammad and the rule of the Fatimids thus represent the peak of an upward trend in prophetic history. *K. al-Fatarāt wa-l-qirānāt* implies that this development has gradually overcome the corruption, disobedience, and languishing that afflicted prior generations and led to *fatarāt*.

Conclusion

Although *fatra* is not an unfamiliar concept in Shiʿi discourse, its crucial importance for the Fatimid Ismaʿilis and their cyclical understanding of history has not been well understood. This is largely because most currently available primary sources discuss the idea of *fatra* only briefly, without defining it or analysing it in any meaningful way. This dearth of relevant discussions may have led scholars to the conclusion that the idea was not significant enough to merit in-depth analysis.

I suggest that the evidence provided by *K. al-Fatarāt wa-l-qirānāt* paints a different picture, one in which *fatra* was actually a crucial element of the Ismaʿili understanding of the pre-Fatimid period when the Ismaʿili mission was underground and the imam was in hiding. The view of this era as a *fatra* was reinforced by the precedent of prophets and imams before Muhammad, who likewise concealed themselves during times of political strife. However, once the Fatimid empire was established and the movement was no longer

early Ismaʿili texts. On this, see Gillon, *Book of Unveiling*, pp. 63–68, on later Ṭayyibī insertions in *K. al-Kashf*. Paul Kraus suggested that *K. al-Fatarāt wa-l-qirānāt* is a compilation dating to the fifth/eleventh century and that Jaʿfar is the author of some early part of the text. Hollenberg, “Neoplatonism”, p. 162, and Halm, “Zur Datierung”, echo Kraus’s analysis.

80 Hamdani and de Blois, “Re-examination of al-Mahdī’s Letter” p. 178.

underground, the idea of a time without an imam constituted more a threat than a useful means of understanding the community's circumstances. After all, if a *fatra* had happened recently, it could happen again in the future; there could be a time in which the Fatimid caliph-imam was so threatened that he had to go into hiding or exile, threatening the stability of a world power. To neutralize this possibility, *K. al-Fatarāt wa-l-qirānāt* rewrote the period of the Fatimids' rise to power not as a *fatra* but as a time in which the imam had remained available to his community. The author insisted that there had not been a *fatra* since before Muhammad's era.

If this reappraisal of the importance of the idea of *fatra* for the Fatimid Isma'ilis is correct, scholars must reexamine the corpus of Isma'ili literature with an eye to discussions of *fatra*. The examples I have presented above are not exhaustive, merely representative; and indeed, the concept of *fatra* is so central to Isma'ili thought that its study cannot be limited to texts in which the term is mentioned explicitly. The discussion will be enriched by consideration not only of further texts in which the term *fatra* plays a central role but also of those that treat periods in which the imam is quiescent and address the roles and responsibilities of other ranks of the *da'wa* hierarchy during such periods—that is, texts in which the concept of *fatra* is implicit.

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